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Original Article

From Personal Anguish to Self-indulgence: Narcissism as a Methodological Challenge in Autoethnography

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Abstract

Autoethnographic inquiry as a journey of unfolding self and others allows researchers to delve into their introspective exploration and situate them within their broader social, political, and cultural milieu. This paper explores the intricate landscapes of the research method by illuminating the role narcissism could play as a daunting methodological challenge within the research endeavor. The paper provides approaches to address those methodological challenges of self-indulgence and biased subjectivity to enhance the validity and rigor of the research by emphasising the importance of critical reflexivity, self-critique, and the incorporation of diverse perspectives wherever and whenever possible. In so doing, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding the advantages, constraints, and credibility of autoethnography as a legitimate method of inquiry.

Keywords: *Autoethnography. Self-indulgence. Narcissism. Qualitative research*

Introduction

Autoethnography is an increasingly prominent qualitative method of exploration gaining popularity as it allows researchers to their introspective exploration as a part of research and contextualise them within their broader social, political, and cultural contexts. It is a unique blend of autobiography and ethnography, focusing on the cultural connection between self and others (Chang, 2008), emphasising the dialogic nature of self and human consciousness, drawing on researchers' lived experiences and placing themselves and others within a larger social context (Maguire, 2006). As Ngunjiri et al. (2010) highlight, autoethnography is particularly useful for understanding the connectivity between self and others, challenging

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traditional research and representation methods, and treating research as a politically and socially conscious act (Ellis, 2016).

However, the legitimacy of this research method has often been questioned in the scholarly realm as to whether it is a valid research method or merely a self-indulgent process of narcissism because of its strong emphasis on self and individual experiences, often leading to accusations of being narcissistic, introspective, and disconnected from broader social contexts, lacking empirical evidence or objective analysis, as highlighted by various scholars (Dahal & Luitel, 2022; Panta & Luitel, 2022; Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016). Autoethnographers tend to prioritise self over others and claim that personal experiences provide valuable insights by uncovering the aspects of various social and cultural phenomena through their lived experiences (Dahal & Luitel, 2022; Wall, 2000). However, scholars (Chang & Bilgen, 2020; Finlay, 2002; Phillips et al., 2022; Spry, 2001) argue that critical self-reflexivity to examine the deeper 'self' allows autoethnographers for a better understanding of the complexities and nuances of personal as well as social phenomena. These concerns have highlighted a need to scrutinise the methodological intricacies of autoethnography as a legitimate research method and address the potential pitfalls that might arise from narcissist tendencies.

Despite criticisms, proponents of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006) argue that it offers a unique opportunity for researchers to unfold their personal-professional embodied experiences, providing valuable insights into subjective realities concerning their larger socio-political and cultural contexts. However, the challenge lies in navigating the methodological implications of using the self as a primary source of data and exploration. While autoethnography provides a valuable opportunity for researchers to critically reflect on their experiences, it should be approached with careful consideration and ethical awareness.

This conceptual paper aims to explore the intricate landscapes of the autoethnographic research method by illuminating the role narcissism could play as a daunting methodological challenge within the research approach. In so doing, it navigates the critical dichotomy of autoethnography while providing approaches to address those methodological challenges of self-indulgence and biased subjectivity to enhance its methodological validity by emphasising the importance of critical reflexivity, self-critique, and the incorporation of diverse perspectives wherever and whenever possible. By endeavouring to critique the interplay between narcissism and autoethnography, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding the benefits, limitations, and validity of autoethnography as a research approach and seeks to maintain rigour and scholarly integrity.

Definition and Methodological Considerations of Autoethnography

This section discusses the conceptual underpinnings of autoethnography, a prominent qualitative research methodology, highlighting its humanistic orientation. Although carrying out autoethnographic research facilitates a profound engagement with the researcher's subjective experiences as well as various other dimensions of life such as sentiments, behaviours, attitudes, and emotions, thereby revealing the entirety of their personal-professional journey, it is not free from ethical challenges and tensions. Therefore, this section also examines the overarching ethical and methodological challenges inherent to autoethnographic inquiry. While acknowledging nuanced complexities inherent in this methodology, the discussion delineates the pathways researchers should consider when they immerse in the multifaceted process of autoethnographic investigation.

Conceptualising Autoethnography as Humanistic Inquiry

Looking at the compound nature of the term, auto/ethnography is literally a product of three spaces: *Auto* means ‘personal experience- the self; *Ethno* means socio-cultural, and/or ‘cultural experience’ and *Graphy* means a method of writing as a genre (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography being a process of self-exploration as viewed by Ellis (2013), "is a thing all its own, not just ‘auto’ linked to ‘ethnography’ (p. 9)". Autoethnography as an autobiographical genre of writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) has been a profound tool for self-exploration. “Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6). Autoethnography has gained popularity in academia for its contribution to the understanding of firsthand human experience (Chang, 2016). Having a connection to autobiography, narrative, and ethnography, it is a unique form of qualitative research (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Autoethnography is both a process and product (Ellis, 2010), connecting life and art so as to create autoethnographic texts to change the world (Holman Jones, 2005). Wall (2006) mentions that culturally relevant personal experience consolidates autoethnography as a professional voyage of self-exploration embracing critical genres of research and writing. Moreover, it allows researchers to be acutely conscious and critical about how they create their own realities (Spry, 2001). Autoethnographic researchers link autobiographical and social by action, emotion, self-consciousness, and introspection. "Personal experiences are the cornerstones of autoethnography in which the researchers mindfully examine socio-cultural contexts and how they have influenced their lived experiences" (Chang, 2016, p. 117). An autoethnographer has been “confronted, challenged, moved and changed” (Wall, 2006) by their everyday practice, experience and learning. Hamdan (2012) opines that autoethnography as a method of inquiry offers opportunities to unpack multiple layers of the narrator's life developing an in-depth understanding of their world.

Challenges and Dilemmas of Autoethnography

The challenges and dilemmas surrounding autoethnography engender a nuanced discourse regarding its validation as a legitimate and reliable research methodology. Scholars underscore the intricate relationship between self-narratives and the broader research landscape, as Sparkes (2000) acknowledges the troubled trajectory of autoethnography's emergence, asserting that its acceptance has been a critical issue: "The emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self...has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic" (p. 22). Within this contested terrain, diverse perspectives emerge among scholars surrounding its challenges and dilemmas. While some posit autoethnography as unorthodox and controversial, others emphasise its potential to reveal deeply personal and subjective dimensions of lived experiences. Chang (2008) articulates that in autoethnography, "the life of self is the primary focus of inquiry, and others are explored in auxiliary relationship with self" (p. 65). Hughes and Pennington (2017) similarly argue that questioning and revealing the self is at the heart of autoethnography. Maydell (2010) maintains that "it is impossible to engage fully with the autoethnographic research practice without understanding the impact of others on the identity construction of self, and a strong theoretical and methodological scholarship can provide a valuable foundation for this process." (p. 1). Ploder and Stadlbauer (2016) point out narcissism, solipsism, lack of arguments and theory, and threat to disciplinary identity as some of the challenges of autoethnography. Aligning with their views, we perceive navigating narcissism as a key challenge of doing autoethnographic inquiry.

A pivotal challenge within autoethnography lies in navigating the tension between self-disclosure and vulnerability, as noted by Ellis (2004). The act of exposing personal experiences

raises questions about the ethical implications of autoethnography. Critics argue that its subjective nature undermines the validity of autoethnographic research, contending that personal biases may lead to skewed interpretations and unreliable findings. Autoethnography's overreliance on self-reflection and personal narrative also challenges the traditional notion of objectivity in research. Maydell (2010) contributes to the discourse by arguing that a comprehensive engagement with autoethnographic research necessitates an understanding of the impact of others on the identity construction of self. Maydell further advocates for a robust theoretical and methodological scholarship, stating that "it is impossible to engage fully with the autoethnographic research practice without understanding the impact of others on the identity construction of self, and a strong theoretical and methodological scholarship can provide a valuable foundation for this process" (Maydell, 2010, p. 1).

Moreover, the lack of a standardised approach in autoethnography raises concerns about the rigour and reliability of the methodology. Unlike more structured research methods, autoethnography allows for a wide range of styles and approaches, making it challenging to compare and replicate studies. Hence, the multifaceted challenges and dilemmas surrounding autoethnography arise from its contested status as a legitimate research methodology. While some scholars highlight its potential for unveiling subjective dimensions of lived experiences, others underscore the method's unorthodox nature and potential pitfalls, particularly in terms of subjectivity, ethical considerations, and the lack of standardised approaches.

Narcissism in Autoethnography

This section discusses narcissism and its conceptual intricacies, philosophical underpinnings, and its potential impact on autoethnographic research, particularly when the researcher is also a participant. The discussion highlights narcissism and self-indulgence as methodological challenges, shedding light on narcissistic tendencies in the autoethnographic research process, and establishes a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between narcissistic dimensions and the autoethnographic endeavour.

Defining Narcissism

"Why should I feel desperate underestimating myself or lamenting over what I couldn't do? Rather I put an effort to capitalise on my signature strength and rejoice upon what I could do. I consider myself an awesome principal not to demonstrate my ego and pride, but to boost my self-esteem and confidence. I am putting in every possible effort to be transparent and accountable at school. In this connection, appreciating myself mindfully has turned out to be a therapeutic experience for me. This emboldens me to sustain myself at my school. Otherwise, I would give up my responsibility being disheartened and despondent amid chaos and uncertainty. I love myself and I accept myself. Am I a narcissist then? If yes, I may be adhering to healthy narcissism or could be grandiose one,"

The above vignette of the second author articulates his thoughts in a pensive mood. At this crossroad of the professional journey, autoethnography has been a journey of soul searching for him that aligns with the views of Hamdan (2012) who articulates that "to me autoethnography is the process of trying to narrate one's own voice coming from within, from one's soul" (p. 600). However, the potential risk of lapsing into excessive self-indulgence necessitates a dual perspective, as Hooks (1984) contends that we must "look from the outside in and from the inside out" (p. 9), paying heed to both the centre and periphery.

Narcissism, characterised by “an excessive sense of self, self-admiration, and self-centeredness” (Malkin, 2015, p. 15), raises intriguing considerations in the context of autoethnography. Malkin further posits that the impact of narcissism, whether harmful or beneficial, healthy or unhealthy, hinges upon the extent to which an individual perceives themselves as special. While narcissism may imbue positive qualities and enhance confidence by projecting a favourable self-image, the potential detachment from external realities poses a caveat. The projection of an overly positive self-image may foster an inflated ego, a phenomenon recognised by Stephens Griffin and Griffin (2019) as a central critique faced by practitioners of autoethnography – “the charge of narcissism” (p. 4). As Winkler (2018) argues, autoethnographers are either self-indulged narcissists or self-reflexive and vulnerable scholars, although scholars such as Allen (2015) maintain that autoethnography allows researchers to create and lead more reflective, meaningful, and socially just lives.

In essence, autoethnography serves as a tool for introspective narrative, originating from the depths of one's being, as highlighted by Hamdan (2012). The cautionary directive from Hooks (1984) underscores the need for a balanced perspective, acknowledging both the internal and external dimensions of the self. Hence, the interplay of narcissism within autoethnography introduces a nuanced consideration of the potential pitfalls and benefits associated with self-reflection by adding a layer of complexity, urging practitioners to confront the charge of narcissism inherent in autoethnographic endeavours. This complex interplay of self-expression, introspection, and external perception underscores the intricate dynamics within the realm of autoethnography.

Methodological Strategies to Address Narcissism in Autoethnography

This section provides insights into methodological strategies for autoethnographic researchers to address narcissism and maintain validity of the research. The discussion centres on the critical role reflexivity and self-critique play in mitigating the potential influence of narcissism throughout the research process. It further highlights the dimensions of scholarly integrity by acknowledging the multiple perspectives in the research, underscoring the importance of maintaining research ethics and the perpetual negotiation between personal experiences and the broader socio-cultural contexts.

Reflexivity and Self-critique

In autoethnographic research, the imperative to navigate the labyrinth of one's own subjectivity and the subtle yet influential presence of narcissism cannot be overstated. Thus, this section discusses the importance of methodological strategies that concentrate on reflexivity and self-critique as tools for addressing narcissism in the autoethnographic research process.

Reflexivity serves as a fundamental pillar in the process of autoethnographic inquiry (Poulos, 2021). The primary focus of reflexivity lies in the pursuit of self-awareness and the honest and reliable unveiling of not only the virtuous facets of one's experiences but also the vulnerabilities therein (Berry & Taylor, 2017), through ongoing self-conversations (Dhakal, 2022). This practice facilitates the critical examination of one's internal biases and deeply ingrained assumptions, thereby strengthening the scholarly endeavour against the potential influence of narcissism. By scrutinising the intricacies of one's subjectivity, positionality, values, and underlying assumptions, researchers can be self-aware and effectively minimise the possible effects of personal biases and idiosyncratic perspectives in the interpretation and presentation of research findings (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018).

Moreover, self-critique, a complementary methodological dimension, demands that researchers embark on a rigorous journey of introspection and discernment. As

autoethnography emphasises introspective feelings and lived experiences (Walford, 2021), this rigorous process extends throughout the entire research process, encompassing the inception of the research project, the conduct of the research, and the subsequent interpretation and discussion of findings. At its core, self-critique is a rigorous examination of one's actions, behaviours, and choices. It necessitates a continual probing of the motivations and interests guiding these choices, with a firm commitment to considering alternative viewpoints and remaining open to constructive feedback. In this comprehensive self-examination, researchers unearth and confront any narcissistic tendencies or overtly self-indulgent inclinations that might compromise the integrity of the research process.

Hence, it is imperative to acknowledge that the rigorous pursuit of reflexivity and self-critique neither diminishes nor undermines the validity of researchers' experiences and perspectives as well as research findings and implications. It rather enhances the methodological rigour and transparency of research findings, thereby enhancing their contextual implications and trustworthiness of findings (Lemon, 2017). Therefore, addressing narcissism in autoethnographic research necessitates an unwavering dedication to the perpetual practice of reflexivity and self-critique. Through active and continuous engagement in these intricate methodological endeavours, systemic arguments and compelling experiences, and well-rendered narratives and vignettes of the self (Wolcott, 2004), researchers can effectively mitigate the potential pitfalls inherent in autoethnographic research and eventually foster research outcomes that are robust, balanced, high-quality, and insightful. This intentional process significantly bolsters the validity and reliability of the research endeavour, ultimately contributing to a profound and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being researched.

Incorporating Multiple Perspectives and Voices

Embracing postmodern philosophy, autoethnography offers space for multiple perspectives, reflexivity and voices (Wall, 2006). Using multiple logics and genres for multi-layered meaning, embracing epistemic pluralism brings conceptual clarity to complex phenomena and nuances of transformative school leadership journey through the moments of to be or not to be, akin to the notion of the Hamletian dilemma (Panta, 2019). We need to maintain a balance and seek harmony in our everyday activities. Overall, multiple logics and genres helps us to create "multiple layers of learning, leading to a paradigm shift in thinking, viewing, and believing" (Luitel, 2009, p. 62), thereby minimising the tendency to be a narcissist.

Maintaining Scholarly Integrity and Research Ethics

Stephens Griffin and Griffin (2019) articulate that even if ethnography is perceived as a narcissistic approach, it remains a worthwhile research strategy to make sense of the self and society in a reflexive manner. Pointing out the limitations of autoethnography, Dealmont (2007) argues that autoethnography is literally an intellectually sluggish type of inquiry. Therefore, it is almost impossible to write and publish while maintaining ethical standards and scholarly rigor.

Autoethnography as a method of inquiry offers opportunities to unpack multiple layers of the narrator's life developing an in-depth understanding of their lifeworld (Hamdan, 2012). Viewing critical autoethnography as intersectional praxis, Alexander (2014) mentions that doing critical autoethnography is sometimes akin to capturing your image in a glass borderless frame with the intent of representing and storying personal experience, envisioning, and engaging a hermeneutics of theorising the self. To address the issue of an autoethnographer being narcissistic, it is pertinent to know what constitutes autoethnography. It is argued that

autoethnography is not only the process of self-construction but also a process of cultural construction as it helps an autoethnographer to navigate the space between individual experience and culture (Hamdan, 2012). In this line, Freeman (2001) argues that "my story can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others" (Freeman, 2001, p. 287).

Conclusion

Autoethnography as a research method holds some potential methodological challenges within the research process. Despite its increasing popularity, autoethnography faces criticisms regarding its legitimacy as scholars often accuse it of self-indulgence and detachment from broader social contexts. They argue that there are some pertinent challenges regarding narcissism while doing autoethnography. A narcissist autoethnographer may run the risk of considering oneself a great example which might be illusionary. There is a possibility of over-claiming and falsehood. Another challenge is the issue of non-comparability in the sense that a narcissist tends to centre the reality to oneself to some extent. Therefore, the nuanced interplay between personal anguish, self-reflection, and the potential risk of narcissism demands careful consideration in autoethnography.

In order to address the challenge associated with narcissism and maintain methodological rigour and validity, an autoethnographer is anticipated to be a critically reflective practitioner who is mindful of minimising navel gazing and focuses on transformative and ethical dimensions. Taking this mode of research as a critical project, focusing on it from the praxis level with due consideration to critical self-reflection may minimise the challenges and dilemmas that loom over while navigating through autoethnographic inquiry. Self-critique, complementing reflexivity, involves rigorous introspection throughout the research process, probing motivations, and remaining open to alternative viewpoints. This intentional engagement enhances the methodological rigour and transparency of autoethnographic research. Furthermore, the perpetual negotiation between personal experiences and broader socio-cultural contexts remains essential to uphold scholarly integrity. Hence, critical self-reflection, ethical considerations, and commitment to diverse perspectives are essential components in addressing the potential methodological challenge of narcissism within autoethnography.

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